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# Warning of War in Europe: Changing Warsaw Pact Planning and Forces ☐

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**National Intelligence Estimate  
Memorandum to Holders**

*This Memorandum to Holders represents  
the views of the Director of Central Intelligence  
with the advice and assistance of the  
US Intelligence Community.*

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NIE 4-1-84  
September 1989

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**NIE 4-1-84**

# **Warning of War in Europe: Changing Warsaw Pact Planning and Forces (U)**

*Information available as of 28 September 1989 was used  
in the preparation of this Memorandum to Holders.*

*The following intelligence organizations participated  
in the preparation of this Memorandum:*

The Central Intelligence Agency  
The Defense Intelligence Agency  
The National Security Agency  
Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State

*also participating:*

The Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence,  
Department of the Army  
The Director of Naval Intelligence,  
Department of the Navy  
The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence,  
Department of the Air Force  
The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters,  
Marine Corps

*This Memorandum was approved for publication by the  
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## Warning of War in Europe: Changing Warsaw Pact Planning and Forces

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- *The warning times we associate with possible Warsaw Pact preparations for war with NATO in Central Europe have increased significantly from those set forth in 1984.*
- *Pact military planners would prefer and are most likely to attempt to conduct a well-prepared attack involving five to six fronts with four fronts in the first strategic echelon. We should be able to provide about four to five weeks of warning of such an attack.*
- *We recognize that circumstances could cause the Pact to commit its forces to an attack after the completion of mobilization and movement, but before completing the postmobilization training necessary for minimum offensive proficiency. The warning times would be shorter, but the Soviets would judge such an attack as highly risky.*
- *Announced Soviet and non-Soviet Warsaw Pact unilateral reductions, if completed, and given no reduction in NATO capabilities, should significantly extend preparation time because of the greater need in the first echelon for currently low-strength divisions from the western USSR.*

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**Figure 1**  
**Projected Warsaw Pact Echelons**  
**in the Western Theater of Military Operations (TMO)—Four-Front Attack**



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## Key Judgments

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The warning times we associate with possible Warsaw Pact preparations for war with NATO in Central Europe have increased significantly from those set forth in NIE 4-1-84. These changes are a direct consequence of Soviet assessments of improved NATO military capability, our improved understanding of the Soviet process of transitioning to war, and changes in Soviet peacetime readiness. Accordingly, before unilateral force reductions, we assess that:

- Pact military planners would prefer and are most likely to attempt to conduct a well-prepared attack involving five to six fronts with four fronts in the first strategic echelon. We should be able to provide about four to five weeks of warning of such an attack. The increased time needed to prepare this attack option results from increased reliance in the first echelon on "not ready" divisions from the western USSR.
- An attack with three fronts in the first echelon remains a possibility in some circumstances. We should be able to provide about two to three weeks of warning of such an attack. Our assessment of the increased time needed to prepare these fronts for sustained offensive operations results from new judgments about the time required to prepare Soviet forces based in Eastern Europe.
- We recognize that circumstances could cause the Pact to commit its forces to an attack after the completion of mobilization and movement but before completing postmobilization training necessary for minimum proficiency for offensive operations. If so, we could provide at least two weeks of warning of a four-front attack or at least one week warning of a less likely three-front attack. We believe, however, the Soviets would judge attacks before completion of postmobilization training as highly risky because of the reliance on reserves lacking such training.

**Figure 2**  
**Announced Warsaw Pact Unilateral Force Reductions**  
**in the Western Theater of Military Operations**



Announced Soviet and non-Soviet Warsaw Pact unilateral force reductions, if completed, should significantly extend preparation time because of the greater need in the first echelon for currently low-strength divisions from the western USSR. Warning of our assessed most likely attack option—four fronts in the first echelon—would increase by about two weeks. If the Soviets elected to attack after only mobilization and movement, warning times would increase by almost a week.

These preparation and warning times after unilateral reductions assume that NATO capabilities remain at current levels. Unilateral NATO reductions could diminish Pact perception of their requirements for success and, therefore, reduce warning time.

The ongoing Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Talks are likely to result in an agreement establishing numerical parity between NATO and Warsaw Pact forces below current NATO levels within the Atlantic-to-the-Urals zone. From peacetime parity, the Soviets would have to reestablish major forces in order to generate the capability to attack successfully and sustain the offensive to the depth of the theater. This requirement would increase preparation time considerably over what we have assessed in this Memorandum. Alternatively, the Soviets could increase the readiness and combat power of residual forces through higher manning levels and acquisition of modern equipment. This would require reinvesting the savings achieved by reducing their forces under CFE into defense and restructuring their forces and redistributing their equipment. These smaller forces would be capable of launching attacks for limited objectives with warning times more like we are accustomed to today. We do not believe such attacks for limited objectives would be attractive to Pact planners because the risks, to include escalation to nuclear war, would far outweigh any potential short-term gains.

We are confident that for the period of this Estimate we will be able to detect and report significant disruptions or a reversal of present political, social, and economic trends in the Warsaw Pact countries. Although these indicators will remain ambiguous with regard to actual national war preparations, they will continue to signal that the potential for a crisis had increased.

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Next 16 Page(s) In Document Exempt

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NIE 4-1-84

## WARNING OF WAR IN EUROPE

### KEY JUDGMENTS

The full text of this Estimate  
is being published separately  
with regular distribution.

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THIS ESTIMATE IS ISSUED BY THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE.

THE NATIONAL FOREIGN INTELLIGENCE BOARD CONCURS.

*The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of the Estimate:*

The Central Intelligence Agency, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the intelligence organization of the Department of State.

*Also Participating:*

The Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence, Department of the Army

The Director of Naval Intelligence, Department of the Navy

The Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, Department of the Air Force

The Director of Intelligence, Headquarters, Marine Corps

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## PREFACE

The last NIE 4-1 was published in 1978. Much of the impetus for reexamination of the subject stemmed from changes in the strategic balance in Europe, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the rise of the Persian Gulf region as a potential theater of superpower confrontation, and the Polish crisis. Particularly addressed in this Estimate are the ramifications for warning in Europe of potential US-Soviet conflict in Iran, essentially the subject of the recently concluded NIE 11/39-83, *Soviet Forces and Capabilities in the Southern Theater of Military Operations*. The Estimate draws heavily on this and other interagency studies that have sharpened our understanding of the issues involved. ☐

25X1

The Estimate describes the warning function, stressing that warning is a continuous process rather than an event. In essence, the capstone of the warning process is a policy decision, not an intelligence one. The Intelligence Community cannot foretell when policymakers will consider themselves "warned" of war, and there is no finite point at which our warning system can predict with certainty that war is imminent. Should war ever come about in Europe again, it is very likely that there will be many warnings issued by the Intelligence Community in many forms, but only policymakers can decide when the evidence is sufficient in their own minds to take whatever action they deem appropriate at any given time. ☐

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

## The US Warning System

The US warning system seeks to provide early notice of events that might presage Warsaw Pact offensive operations. However, there is no finite point at which the warning system can foretell with certainty that war is imminent. ☐

Warning of war should be viewed not as a single event, but as a process of communicating warnings of increasing threat. The Intelligence Community is capable of detecting and correctly assessing Warsaw Pact capabilities and readiness for war. ☐

The strength of the warning system for discerning increased capabilities of the Warsaw Pact to initiate hostilities should not be construed as a capacity to foretell with confidence the course of subsequent events. Nor should recipients of warning expect that definitive thresholds at which decisions should be made will necessarily be identified. While the process of information gathering and assessment is continuous, policy decisions to react or not to react to the flow of advisories are the principal determinants of the success or failure of the warning process. ☐

We cannot be absolutely certain that we would be able in every instance to distinguish between preparations for an exercise and similar activities as part of preparations for war. However, we believe that the context of Soviet actions and their scope and intensity would provide reasonable insight into the likelihood of war. ☐

## The Likelihood of War

We believe it highly unlikely that the Warsaw Pact would attack NATO under present circumstances. Further, we believe war in Europe would become likely only as a result of profound political, military, economic, or social changes—or a serious miscalculation—and would be preceded by a period of growing tension resulting in a crisis of great severity. ☐

We do not foresee in the next three to five years development of a trend that would make a NATO-Warsaw Pact war likely. ☐

We believe it unlikely that the Soviets would deliberately commit their forces in the Persian Gulf region as a strategic feint designed to draw US forces to the region, and then attack NATO. Further, a US-Soviet confrontation in the Gulf would not necessarily provide Moscow and its allies with increased opportunities for masking preparations for war in Europe.

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### Warsaw Pact Readiness, Reliability, and Threat Perception

Pact planners realize that there is a trade-off between increasing force readiness or superiority and the likelihood of achieving surprise. Increasing one risks losing the other. Pact planners believe that full military readiness in peacetime is not necessary or realistically feasible.

The military reliability of the non-Soviet Warsaw Pact forces is critical to prospects for Soviet success on the battlefield. We believe the Soviets would be unlikely to initiate hostilities against NATO unless they had reasonable expectation of participation by most Pact forces. We also believe that military discipline and established control mechanisms are likely to assure the initial reliable response of most Pact forces.

Moscow is convinced that NATO would probably employ nuclear weapons in a NATO-Warsaw Pact war. The existence of the separately controlled US, British, and French strategic nuclear strike systems increases Moscow's uncertainty about nuclear escalation. The Soviets see war in Europe, particularly nuclear war, as holding their territory at risk to strategic nuclear strikes.

### Attack Options and Warning

There is no evidence that would indicate that the Pact might launch an attack on NATO from a peacetime readiness posture. In the extremely unlikely case of a sudden attack on NATO from a peacetime posture, we judge that US and NATO intelligence could detect and would report unusual communications, increased activity by units, and dispersion and/or movement within a few hours after the initiation of this activity. However, a final judgment that an attack was imminent might not be reached before hostilities began.

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We believe that war in Europe would most likely be preceded by a period of rising tension or crisis. During such a period it is likely that the Soviets would raise the levels of readiness of their forces. If this were to

transpire, the length of time that it would take for them to bring their forces to peak preparedness after making a decision to attack could be very short. ☐

We conclude that the smallest force the Pact might use to initiate offensive operations in Central Europe would consist of two fronts<sup>1</sup>—about 40 divisions. In the most urgent circumstances, the Pact would need at least five to six days to prepare and position a two-front force if it had made no previous effort to raise the readiness of its forces. Less preparation time (four to five days) might be possible, but this would require that the Pact attack without several of the less ready and/or more distant divisions in eastern Czechoslovakia. The complexity and magnitude of the required preparations and the risks involved in insufficient preparation would probably cause or require the Pact to take longer, with seven to 10 days being a more realistic time frame. However, if the Pact did select this option, indicators of such preparations would be observed, assessed, and reported to policymakers within 24 hours after activity had been initiated. ☐

We believe that the Pact would require, at a minimum, about eight to nine days to prepare and position a three-front force for an attack—about 60 divisions. A more realistic time frame for these preparations might be 10 to 12 days from a “cold start.” We judge that, except under extraordinarily urgent circumstances, the Pact would prefer to prepare at least a three-front force before initiating hostilities. We estimate that we could provide warning within 24 hours after preparations for this option were initiated. ☐

A five-front attack posture—85 to 90 divisions—would largely fulfill the Pact's conservative doctrinal preferences in regard to force superiority and would take at least 15 days to achieve and might take up to three weeks. Should the Pact opt to launch a full five-front attack from a “cold start,” we judge that we would be able to provide warning within 24 to 48 hours after preparations began. ☐

We judge that the gradual approach to achieving full readiness in reaction to a developing crisis would be the most likely course of events if the Pact were to prepare for war with NATO. We are confident that we could inform policymakers that the Pact was initiating the final steps that would enable it to go to war within 24 hours after the beginning of the activities associated with the transition to a “full readiness” condition. We already would have issued warnings—probably repeatedly—of the military measures being taken by the Pact, and of a growing danger of hostilities. ☐

<sup>1</sup> Although not directly comparable to any Western military organization, a front would be similar to a NATO army group and its associated Allied tactical air force in size, level of command, and function. ☐

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